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## DANCING THROUGH ENGLISH LITERATURE

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English literature, beginning with *Beowulf* and coming down to Alfred Noyes' *Tales of the Mermaid Tavern*, has contained many allusions to dancing, and yet the impression seems to prevail quite widely that the English are the only people of Europe who have no great national folk-dance tradition. That this is not so, we are beginning to realize. The work of modern students of folklore, especially Mr. Cecil J. Sharp, is beginning to bear fruit; and as students and teachers of English literature, which can be understood only in the light of English life and customs, it behooves us to understand as well as possible this most important amusement—dancing.

Dancing, modern or folk, divides into two great categories: spectacular or ceremonial dancing, and social dancing. The former variety is represented among us by what is known as stage dancing, the only idea of which is to give pleasure to the spectator; the latter is exemplified by the modern social dances of the ball-room and cabaret. So it is with folk dancing; and if we examine the not so very remote past, we shall find the morris and sword dances, which satisfied the desire of our ancestors for spectacle dances; and the country dances, without which no social occasion was complete.

Until about fifty years ago, both morris and sword dancing seem to have flourished in England, and few villages were without their "sides" of dancers. The custom then suddenly came to an end, the bands of dancers lost interest, and it looked as though it would not be many years before only the names would remain to remind us of these interesting amusements. Fortunately, before this catastrophe could happen, a man appeared who was to save for us the knowledge of this fascinating art—Mr. Cecil J. Sharp. A gifted musician, Mr. Sharp, became interested in these dances. He succeeded in finding here and there throughout the country old men who had in their younger days been "morris dancers." Wherever possible, and in some cases where it seemed impossible, he got them to teach him the dances, and to sing or whistle the melodies for him. In this way he collected dozens of morris and sword dances, put them in permanent reference form in his *Morris Book* and *Sword Dance Book*, taught them to others, and started the recent revival which is giving so much delightful and artistic recreation to hundreds of people in the United States, as well as in England.

In our reading of English literature, we shall probably find more reference to the morris than to any other kind of dancing. This, as I shall try to show, is probably due to the fact that the term "morris dancing" was very widely and loosely used to cover all kinds of native dancing not distinctly social in nature. We shall find many references, such as Milton's in *Comus*, that will make it desirable for us to know just what a morris dance looked like:

The sounds and seas and all their finny drove  
Now to the moon in wavering morrice move . . . .

The usual morris dance was performed by six dancers, but they were commonly accompanied by several other characters, as a treasurer, a king, a queen, a squire, a fool, a hobby horse, Robin Hood, Maid Marion, etc. In some of the dances the dancers carry sticks, usually about sixteen inches long, which they strike together in the process of the dance. In others they carry handkerchiefs, one in each hand, which they move forward and back, and up and down, with swings of their arms. In all morris dances

they wear bells at their knees. This information enables us to understand the many allusions which we find in our reading. For instance, Laneham, a contemporary of Queen Elizabeth, who describes her well-known visit to Kenilworth, in his *Captain Cox, His Ballads and Books; or Robert Laneham's Letter*, tells how she was entertained by ". . . a lively morris dauns, according to the ancient manner: six daunserz, Mawdmarion, and the fool."

Ben Jonson gives us the following interesting conversation in *The Gipsies Metamorphosed*:

*Clod*: They should be morris dancers by their gingle, but they have no napkins.

*Cockrel*: No, nor a hobby-horse.

*Clod*: Oh, he's often forgotten, that's no rule; but there is no Maid Marion nor Friar amongst them, which is a surer mark.

*Cockrel*: Nor a fool that I see.

We know that the morris dances were usually performed during certain specific holidays, such as Whitsuntide, May Day, and Christmas. Shakespeare gives us evidence of the prevalence of this custom in his day. In *Henry V* he makes the Dauphin harangue his leaders to show no more fear of England.

. . . . than if we heard that England  
Were busied with a Whitsun morris-dance.

Again, in *All's Well That Ends Well*, the clown swears that his answer is as fit for all questions

. . . . as Tib's rush for Tom's finger, as a pancake for Shrove Tuesday, a Morris for May-day, as the nail to his hole . . . .

The sporting age of Queen Anne seems to have succeeded in making a contest of morris dancing, for we find the following advertisement in a paper of that period:

At Epsom Old Wells . . . . on Whitsun Tuesday will be Moris Dancing, Set against Set, for Lac'd Hats, at 10 a Clock, with other Diversions.

But it is not only the older authors in whom we find allusions to this dance. Scott, a shrewd observer and careful student of folk customs, in *The Lady of the Lake* has the morris dancers take part in the games that are held at Stirling:

And see! upon the crowded street,  
In motley group what maskers meet!

Banner and pageant, pine and drum,  
And merry morrice-dancers come.  
I guess, by all this quaint array,  
The burghers hold their sports to-day.

But it is Irving, that lover of the romantic past, to whom we are indebted for our finest description of a morris dance, which proves that during his visits to England he must have observed this type of dancing, probably not once but many times. The following description appears in "Christmas Day," and gives an account of a morris dance with sticks.

We had not been long home when the sound of music was heard from a distance. A band of country lads, without coats, their shirt-sleeves fancifully tied with ribbons, their hats decorated with greens, and clubs in their hands, was seen advancing up the avenue, followed by a large number of villagers and peasantry. They stopped before the hall-door, where the music struck up a peculiar air, and the lads performed a curious and intricate dance, advancing, retreating, and striking their clubs together, keeping exact time to the music. . . .

The Squire eyed this fanciful exhibition with great interest and delight, and gave me a full account of its origin, which he traced to the times when the Romans held possession of the island; plainly proving that this was a lineal descendant of the ancients. "It was now," he said, "nearly extinct, but he had accidentally met with traces of it in the neighborhood, and had encouraged its revival. . . ."

Here we must stop our quoting in order to discuss the origin of this dance, and we shall find that Squire Bracebridge was probably more nearly right in tracing it to "the times when the Romans held possession of the island" than many more modern students. It was long believed that it was of Moorish origin, because a similar dance was, and still is, found on both sides of the Franco-Spanish border, and that "morris" was a corruption of Moorish. The former belief in the light of modern investigations seems no longer tenable. When we come to examine the sword dance, we shall find such obvious traces of primitive religious rites as to justify the conclusion that both sword and morris dance are outgrowths of primitive religious ceremonies. Nevertheless, it is probable that the accepted derivation of "morris" from Moorish is correct. This belief is held by Mr. Sharp. We know that morris dancers used sometimes to "black up"; in fact, there

are still a few villages where they are accustomed invariably to put smudges on their faces "for luck." It used to be thought that they were representing Moors, but it is much more likely that this custom grew out of the time when the dance was still religious, and it was "bad luck" for the dancer to be recognized. The element of disguise on the part of those who serve the gods is very common among primitive peoples, as many forms of religious masks bear witness. Now we know that to the people of a few hundred years ago the typical black man was the Moor, and not the negro. Hence it seems reasonable to accept Chambers' conclusion (*The Medieval Stage*) that "the faces were not blackened because the dancers represented Moors, but rather that the dancers were thought to represent Moors because their faces were blackened." An examination of the sword dance will further our conviction that both these dances are of native origin.

The sword dance is performed by a number of dancers, commonly varying in different villages from five to eight. Each dancer has a sword which he holds in one hand. The dance is usually begun in a circle, each man holding his sword over his own shoulder, and grasping the point of the sword of his neighbor. Thus the dancers are linked together, and in this way, each holding the hilt of one sword and the point of another, they go through various evolutions which range from simple marching to the most complicated figures. The important point is that in each dance of which we know, at some point in the dance, or sometimes at several points, the dancers weave their swords together into what they call a lock, a nut, or a rose. This is a framework of the swords which usually has an opening in the center twelve or more inches in diameter. Now in certain villages it is customary to place this on the head or around the neck of one of the dancers, often an "extra character" such as the fool. The dancers would then all draw their swords together, and the supposed victim would fall as if dead. This mock killing supports Chambers' belief that "the use of the swords in the dance was not martial at all; their object was not to suggest a fight, but a mock or symbolic sacrifice." It seems to me that here we have the germ of all these dances. Possibly once there was a real victim in the

ceremony. At any rate, the idea of death and resurrection, so common in many forms of folk ceremonies, is obviously present. As the religious elements became forgotten, and the dance was continued merely for the pleasure of the performers and spectators, special swords, often of wood, were introduced to allow more complicated evolutions to be performed; and nothing seems more probable than that in the course of time swords gave place to sticks and sticks to handkerchiefs; and thus the dances as we know them grew out of the old religious rites. This evolution explains many customs which are otherwise inexplicable but which invariably accompany the performances of the dances in many places.

Many facts unite to strengthen this belief of the similar or at least cognate origin of the sword and morris dance. The country people seem to make no distinction, but call both kinds of performers morris dancers. Both of these dances are found in many other parts of Europe besides England, and it is more reasonable to suppose that they grew up out of common customs than that they spread from a single source. In many places the sword dancers, as well as the morris dancers, black their faces. Moreover, while in the sword dances that survive in England it is not customary for bells to be worn, they are worn in the sword dance in many other parts of Europe. The use of bells for religious purposes to frighten away evil spirits is widespread; it is found among eastern priests and Indian medicine men; and that it was once common in Europe seems perfectly reasonable. If so, we may find here the origin of the morris bell. That the custom of sword dancers wearing bells, however, was not unknown on the British Island seems to be attested by Scott, whose interest in these matters is proved by his care to get an accurate description of the sword dance which he saw performed on the Island of Papa in 1814. Yet, in *The Lady of the Lake*, we find the following:

Now, in the Castle-park, drew out  
Their checkered bands the joyous rout.  
There morricers, with bell at heel  
And blade in hand, their mazes wheel.

He seems to find nothing out of place in having the dancers wear bells and carry "blade in hand," and yet being called "morricers."

All these facts seem to prove that, while "morris" is probably a derivation from Moorish, as most dictionaries state, the dances so designated are native English and grow out of primitive religious rites and customs.

Still further from the source than the regular morris dance is the morris jig. This is performed usually by only one or two dancers, and the religious rites have entirely disappeared; the dance has become wholly spectacular. When there are two performers, the first does the evolution, and then rests while it is repeated by the second one. In connection with morris jigs it is impossible not to think of William Kempe, who is thought to have been the fool in Shakespeare's company and the first actor to play Launcelot, Touchstone, and Dogberry. He did a historical morris dance of nine days from London to Norwich, and he records it in his book,

*Kempe's nine daies wonder.*

Performed in a daunce from

London to Norwich.

Containing the pleasures, paines and kinde entertainment of William Kempe  
between London and that City

In his late *Morrice*.

Wherein is somewhat set downe worth note; to reprove the slaunders spred  
of him; many things merry, nothing hurtfull.

Written by himself to satisfie his friends.

This is the incident so well used by Noyes in "The Companion of a Mile" in *Tales of the Mermaid Tavern*. But we must leave the spectacle dances and turn to the social country dance, which we shall find entirely different in nature and origin.

Morris and sword dances are, in their original forms, done only by men. They are danced usually only on special occasions, and the dancers customarily maintain a grave demeanor. Their faces are unsmiling, and their attitude serious, as we should expect in a ceremony of this sort. But the country dancers act very differently, for they have but one purpose, to enjoy themselves.

Even before the recent revival, country dancing had not entirely disappeared. It existed in two places: in certain outlying country districts, where a single type of dance, the longways, had survived and was still used in "old-fashioned" parties; and in

the ballroom, where the lancers and quadrilles represented a certain type "improved" by the grafting on of many French steps and figures by generations of dancing masters. Mr. Sharp interested himself in this form and succeeded in getting from country people a number of country dances in their traditional forms. But the great source of country dances is the most popular dancing book ever published, not excepting any modern manual on the tango or the one-step: *The English Dancing Master*, of the London publisher, John Playford, to whom be everlasting praise and glory.

The familiarity of all classes with country dances is manifested by many allusions all through the literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For instance, the last scene of Milton's *Comus*, which was first played on September 29, 1643, begins with the scene

presenting Ludlow town, and the President's castle;  
then come in country Dancers. . . .

Yet we learn with something of a shock of surprise that it was in the midst of the Puritan revolt, in 1650, that there appeared the first edition of

The English Dancing Master:

or,

Plaine and easie Rules for the Dancing of Country Dances,  
with the Tune to each Dance.

London

Printed by *Thomas Harper*, and are to be sold by  
*John Playford*, at his Shop in the Inner Temple  
neere the Church doore. 1651.

Our astonishment is increased by the appearance in 1652 of a second edition, "enlarged and corrected from many grosse errors." No less than fifteen others followed, the last in 1728. The first edition contains the description of 104 dances; the seventeenth edition is in three parts and contains a total of 918 dances. There is a melody for each dance, and its notation. But the ability to read these descriptions had been lost until Mr. Sharp, with his knowledge of the traditional country dance as it still lived, and of sword and morris dancing, set to work to puzzle them out. He has now published, in the four parts of *The Country Dance Book*,

107 of these dances and the music to which they were done; so that not only is our knowledge of folklore enriched by our understanding of the dances, but many beautiful melodies which had been lost for centuries have been made available. A few of the tunes which Mr. Sharp has resurrected appear in the invaluable and scholarly work of Chappel, *Music of the Olden Times*, a book which will entrance lovers of folk songs and dances. But the greater number of the melodies in *The Country Dance Book* appear in no other available form.

Country dances, we learn, are divided into two classes according to their form: rounds or squares, and longways. In the former as the names imply, the dancers stand in a circle or a square, each man with his partner standing at his right side. It is obvious that from these forms have descended the lancers and quadrilles with which we may be familiar. In the longways dances, the basic formation is two straight lines, the men on one side, and their partners opposite and facing them. The best-known example of this form in the United States is the Virginia reel, which is identical with the dance made famous by Addison, the Sir Roger de Coverley. Like the morris and sword dances, the country dance has its origin far back in antiquity. Mr. Sharp says it "is a lineal descendant of the May-day Round, a pagan quasi-religious ceremonial of which the May-pole dance is, perhaps, the most typical example." Chambers, in *The Mediaeval Stage*, says: "The customs of the village festival gave rise by natural development to two types of dance. There was the processional dance of the band of worshippers in progress round their boundaries and from field to field, from house to house, from well to well of the village. . . . The other type of folk dance . . . is derived from the comparatively stationary dance of the group of worshippers around the more especially sacred objects of the festival, such as the tree or the fire." The longways, then, doubtlessly developed from the processional, and the rounds and squares from the circular religious dances.

The etymology of "country dance" has been needlessly confused. The belief that it is a corruption of the French *contre* was long ago refuted, yet I have heard this opinion offered even in

advanced university classes. Sometimes it is stated that *contre* is used because it applies to a dance of the people as contrasted with that of the nobles; sometimes it is explained as a dance in which partners stand *contre* or opposite each other, and not side by side as in the minuet, for example. Neither idea is true. The French *contre* dance is a much later development than the English country dance. It is not mentioned by any of the early French writers on dancing, while nearly all the old English writers describe country dancing as of native origin. Moreover, that *contre* applied to the dance is "brilliant anachronism," as Chappel remarks, is proved by the history of it; for the further back we go, the more uncommon seem the longways, the only form to which *contre* dance could be applied with any shade of meaning, and the more popular are the rounds and squares. In the first edition of Playford (1650), out of the 104 dances described, but 34 are longways; of the 918 in the last edition (1728), all are longways except 14. There is no doubt that the correct and original term was country dancing, meaning a dance originating and popular in the country.

One who is familiar with the Virginia reel or any of the quadrilles or lancers will readily understand the nature of the dance. It consists of a number of "figures" or evolutions done to a strain of melody, which is usually repeated for each new figure. A dance is simply an arrangement of figures which has in the course of time become associated with a certain melody; and the same figures are used over and over again in the different dances. The steps are of the simplest, walking, running, and skipping being most commonly used. Hands are often joined, as in turning partners or making a large circle. Those who are familiar with any of these delightful and wholesome dances may have difficulty in sympathizing with Budgell, who writes a most interesting account of a contemporary dance in the *Spectator*, No. 67 (May 17, 1711). The quotation is too good to cut.

I am a Man in Years, and by an honest Industry in the World have acquired enough to give my Children a liberal Education, tho' I was an utter Stranger to it myself. My eldest Daughter, a Girl of Sixteen, has for some time past been under the tuition of Monsieur *Rigadoon*, a Dancing Master in the City; and I was prevailed upon by her and her Mother to go last Night to one of his Balls. I must own to you, Sir, that having never been at such

a Place before, I was very much pleased and surprised with that Part of his Entertainment which he called *French Dancing*. There were several young Men and Women, whose limbs seemed to have no other Motion but purely what the Musick gave them. After this Part was over, they began a Diversion which they called Country Dancing, and wherein there were also some things not disagreeable, and divers *Emblematical Figures*, composed, as I guess, by Wise Men for the Instruction of Youth.

Amongst the rest, I observed one, which I think they call *Hunt the Squirrel*, in which while the Woman flies, the Man pursues her; but as soon as she turns, he runs away, and she is obliged to follow.

The Moral of this Dance does, I think very aptly recommend Modesty and Discretion to the Female Sex.

But as the best Institutions are liable to Corruptions, so, Sir, I must acquaint you, that very great Abuses are crept into the Entertainment. I was Amazed to see my Girl handed by, and handling young Fellows with so much Familiarity; and I could not have thought it had been in the Child. They very often made use of a most impudent and lascivious Step called *Setting*, which I know not how to describe to you, but by telling that it is the very reverse of *Back to Back*. At last an impudent young Dog bid the Fiddlers play a Dance called *Mol Patley*, and after having made two or three Capers, ran to his Partner, locked his Arms in hers, and whisked her round Cleverly above Ground in such manner that I, who sat upon one of the lowest Benches, saw further above her Shoe than I can think fit to acquaint you with. I could no longer endure these Enormities; wherefore, just as my Girl was going to be made a Whirligig, I ran in, seized the Child, and carried her home.

Ashton, who quotes this in his scholarly and interesting *Social Life in the Reign of Queen Anne*, adds, with what appears to us as good reason, "Poor Budgell! What would have been his feelings could he have but seen a galop or a valse?"

The peculiar names of country dances usually cause amusement to one who hears them for the first time. Here are a few chosen at random: Upon a Summer's Day, Lady in the Dark, Fain I Would, Catching of Fleas, Sweet Kate, Put on Thy Smock on a Monday, The Gelding of the Devil, The Fit's Come on Me Now, The Whim, Love Lies A-Bleeding, The Maiden's Blush. This list of interesting titles could be prolonged indefinitely, but we must know the reason for such strange names. It is that these were in most cases the titles of popular ballads, the melodies of which, in the course of time, became associated with the arrangement of steps and figures to which they gave their names. Sir Thomas Elyot explains the matter in *Governour*, which appeared in 1531.

And as for the special names (of the dances), they were taken, as they be now, either of the names of the first inventors, or of the measure and number they do contain; or, of *the first words of the ditty which the song comprehendeth, where of the dance was made.*

To students of the ballad this knowledge is of great value, for it would be almost impossible now to identify the tunes of our old ballads except for the fact that the dances retained their names. We rarely find the words and the music together, and indeed we rarely find the music at all except in these old dance books.

Literature, especially that of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is full of references to country dances. How much more can we appreciate the following allusion from *Romeo and Juliet* if we are familiar with the lovely melody and the charmingly quiet dance that is called *Heart's-ease*?

*Peter:* Musicians, O musicians, *Heart's ease, heart's ease:* O an you will have me live, play *Heart's-ease.*

*First Mus.:* Why *Heart's-ease*?

*Peter:* O musicians, because my heart itself plays *My heart is full of woe:* O play some merry dump to comfort me!

*Sellenger's Round, or the Beginning of the World* seems to have been very popular from the many references we find to it. Middleton, in *Father Hubbard's Tales* (1604), writes:

Do but imagine now what a sad Christmas we all kept in the country, without either carols, wassail bowls, dancing of *Sellenger's Round* in moonshine nights about Maypoles, shoeing the mare, hoodman-blind, hot cockles, or any of our Christmas gambols.

In Heywood's *Fair Maid of the West* we find:

They have so tired me with their moriscoes (morris dances), and I have so tickled them with our country dances, *Sellenger's Round* and *Tom Tiler.*

Richard Steele, in the *Tatler*, No. 34, describes John Salter, the proprietor of Don's Coffee House, and mentions two dances well known to folk dancers. He explains that, besides shaving and tooth drawing, "Don Saltero," as Steele calls him, played on the violin, and

. . . if he would wholly give himself up to the string, instead of playing twenty beginnings to tunes, he might, before he dies, play *Roger de Caubly* quite out. I heard him go through his whole round, and indeed he does play the *Merry Christ Church Bells* pretty justly.

An entry in Pepys's *Diary* for December 31, 1662, must not be omitted. He is describing a royal ball.

. . . and thence into the room where the ball was to be, crammed with fine ladies, the greatest of the Court. By and by, comes the King and Queen (Charles II and Catherine), the Duke (Buckingham) and Duchess, and all the great ones: and after seating themselves, the King takes out the Duchess of York, and the Duke, the Duchess of Buckingham; the Duke of Monmouth, my Lady Castlemaine: and so other lords other ladies; and they danced the Brantle. After that, the King led a lady a single Coranto, and then the rest of the lords, one after another, other ladies: very noble it was, and a great pleasure to see. Then to *country dances*; the King leading the first, which he called for; which was, says he, *Cockolds all awry*, the old dance of England. . . . Having staid as long as I thought fit, to my infinite content, it being the greatest pleasure I could wish now to see at Court, I went home, leaving them dancing.

Now *Cockolds all awry* appears in Playford as *Cuckolds all a row*, and Sharp prints it in *The Country Dance Book* under its alternative title of *Hey, Boys, Up go we*, the name of a partisan ballad with which the melody became later associated, and which was very popular with the Cavaliers.

These examples could be indefinitely continued, but I hope I have shown that English teachers may find both pleasure and profit in investigating this most interesting subject. In several of our large cities there are already branches of the English Folk Dance Society, whose purpose is to disseminate a knowledge of English folk songs and dances, and to encourage the practice of them. Other centers are being organized, and teachers who are so fortunately located as to be able to associate themselves with one will find that it is well worth while. To them I extend the invitation of Milton's pupil and nephew, Edward Philips, who wrote in *The Mysteries of Love and Eloquence, or the Arts of Wooing and Complimenting*:

Ladies, will you be pleased to dance a country dance or two, for 'tis that which makes you truly sociable and us truly happy; being like the chorus of a song where all the parts sing together.